

2 December 1980

MEMORANDUM FOR: Richard Allen

SUBJECT : Intelligence and the Policy Process

1. When we talked last summer, I touched briefly on my concern with the steady trend (since 1961) toward ad hocery in national security policymaking and the concomittant decline in systematic use of intelligence capabilities at the NSC level. The following are some further thoughts on that subject.

2. The problem is not that intelligence does not flow into the policy process. It does, but in an unstructured and almost invisible way. The officer in State or NSC Staff who writes an options paper does so from a background of the intelligence flow available to him; he may cast his paper to refer to specific intelligence reports or judgments. More often, however, the underlying intelligence is only implicit in his paper. Indeed he can, and often does, substitute his own judgments for those of the Intelligence Community -- and, generally speaking, the more senior the policy officer, the more prone he is to carry his own NIEs around in his head. The decisionmaker is rarely exposed to an independent intelligence assessment of the situation at hand, specifically focused and coherently expressed.

3. Things were not always so. In the Eisenhower administration it was standard practice for the NSC to call for a National Intelligence Estimate at the same time it scheduled a policy review. The NSC principals then received the NIE and the policy paper as one package. This system was, of course, somewhat ponderous, but the NIE machinery of the time was able on occasion to respond within 48 to 72 hours.

4. The Eisenhower system was dismantled by the Kennedy administration in the interests of speed and flexibility, but the new emphasis on ad hoc policymaking began a submergence of the intelligence product that has continued ever since. Many came over the years to believe that a single paper in which intelligence and policy were meshed was easier for the policymaker to handle, but the result was a more selective intelligence input. Since Kennedy's time the increasing pace of decision-making -- the result both of personalities and the gradual reduction of the US to the reactor rather than the initiator of events -- has made systematic intelligence inputs more difficult. Finally, and not least, the intelligence estimates machinery atrophied as a policy-support mechanism; many people nowadays think of an estimate as merely a ponderous volume that takes several months to prepare.

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interests of the agencies while reducing the friction that comes from the President's need to balance those interests. With regard to the needs of intelligence, not only can such a system provide the mechanism for systematic input, it can also serve as a channel for feedback. Finally such a body could well be charged with developing priorities. There are various existing organizations and procedures in the Intelligence Community which have been designed to offer these same needs of input, feedback, and priorities, but in fact they tend to be cumbersome and not nearly so effective as the Eisenhower model I have described. Furthermore, such a model need not itself become muscle-bound if the greatest care is taken to keep it staffed with the finest first-rate talent available.

9. These are, of course, my personal views and in no sense an official position. Make any use of them you will.

Richard Lehman

5. Senior policy officers have always, and often with considerable justification, not that their judgment and often their facts were as good or better than those of intelligence officers. But they are busy people who do not have time to study each issue thoroughly; they leave that to staff officers and hence can become prisoners of staff officers' judgments. There is a strong argument for systematically testing these judgments against those of the professional intelligence cadre. Moreover, the flow of information is so great and so inchoate that there is an equally strong argument for having it evaluated, integrated, and systematically assessed by persons trained and equipped for the job. Even more important, senior officers are forced of necessity to concentrate on the immediate. It is difficult for them to focus on all the implications of a developing situation when the need is to make a quick response because other, unrelated problems also demand their attention. Intelligence assessments can look at a problem as a whole. By linking the immediate issue to broader and longer-term consequences across geographic boundaries and across disciplines, they can provide new dimensions to policymaking, in effect giving the decisionmaker greater confidence that the ramifications of his decisions have been thought out. Similarly, they can address still other problems in the world outside the harassed senior policymaker's immediate consciousness.

6. To provide this service, intelligence needs three things from the NSC: a) a system for the consideration of intelligence assessments prior to major policy decisions; b) feedback on the discussions leading to policy decisions and on high-level exchanges with foreign leaders, and c) national priorities for intelligence collection and analysis defined by consumers and not by intelligence itself. For the first, a simple requirement that every options paper be accompanied by a separate and independent intelligence assessment would help, but it could not work well without some sort of mechanism to facilitate it. For such a mechanism one could do worse than look to the Eisenhower model.

7. As I remember it, in those years the NSC was supported by a Planning Board at roughly the Undersecretary level, and the latter by a working group of Staff Assistants. There is some doubt as to the utility of the Planning Board proper; it appears to have been just another bureaucratic layer. The Staff Assistants group, however, did the real work and was quite valuable. It consisted of full-time representatives of the NSC principals, drawn from the brightest young professionals rising to senior ranks in the agencies. As a permanent, full-time body, it served as a kind of substantive secretariat for the NSC principals and as a link between NSC deliberations and the contributing agencies. Its primary function was to draft and coordinate policy papers, for which its CIA member provided the intelligence input. The latter was also responsible for ensuring that appropriate National Intelligence Estimates were prepared to accompany major policy papers being forwarded to the NSC.

8. While the system became somewhat musclebound and over-coordinated, it provided a unifying element to the NSC it has lacked ever since. And it was reasonably efficient: people who work together all the time can do so much more smoothly than a succession of ad hoc committees and working groups. With this added experience they can represent the